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ABSTRACT

At the White House Consultation with Rural Women held in June 1980, over 250 women from all walks of rural life and from 12 other nations responded to the Carter Administration's rural policy on small farms, health, employment, communications, education, housing, food, agriculture, and land and energy issues and made recommendations for action for inclusion in the national Small Community and Rural Development Policy. The policy recommendations made by the participants included proposed changes in federal rules, regulations, and legislation and emphasized the importance of women's organizations and other community-based groups. The participants recommended greater government sensitivity to rural needs and, in particular, to the needs of rural women. Recommendations primarily advocated various types of financial assistance, tax incentives, technical assistance, and educational opportunities which federal and state governments should make available to rural residents and rural communities. Recommendations also dealt with federal policies, standards, and services applicable to rural communities. The participants stressed that rural people know what their needs are and that government and industry should respect and encourage their ability to solve problems in their own way. (Author/CM)

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REPORT ON THE

WHITE HOUSE CONSULTATION

WITH RURAL WOMEN

JUNE, 1980

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U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

The White House Consultation with Rural Women, held June 24, 1980, was the first White House conference devoted to articulating the needs and celebrating the resourcefulness of rural women in America. The meeting, co-sponsored by White House Chief of Staff Jack Watson and Presidential Assistant, Sarah Weddington and coordinated with Rural American Women, Inc. drew over 250 participants from all walks of rural life and from twelve other nations.

Rural women representing the interests of small and large farmers, small business, farm and plantation workers, elected officials and community-based organizations came to Washington, D.C. to present their priorities for rural development to senior officials of the Carter Administration. They responded to a call to organize, as rural women, around the issues that affected their lives and livelihood and emerged as a force to be revoked with.

Rural women responded to the Carter Administration's rural policy on small farms, health, employment, communications, education, housing, food, agriculture, land and energy issues and articulated recommendations for action for inclusion in the national Small Community and Rural Development Policy. And they spoke eloquently of the values of rural life and their struggle to preserve America's rural heritage.

This report on the White House Consultation with Rural Women highlights recommendations for action proposed by and for rural women. These recommendations challenge all rural people seeking to improve their standard of living and the quality of life in their communities.

Together the statements and observations recorded here constitute a platform for organizing efforts to improve federal government responsiveness to rural development and to the special needs and resources of rural women. It is our wish that these ideas continue to be articulated and pursued by rural women whose voices and leadership are critical in guiding this country toward equity and progress for rural women and for rural America.

I. NOTABLE OBSERVATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Jack Watson, Assistant to President Carter and Chief of Staff

The resources of this country, in terms of the people who live here and in terms of our natural resources, are perhaps richer and more abundant than those of any nation on the face of the earth. It is our legacy to have and it is our responsibility to pass on the future generations. And we must not neglect or forget the contributions of rural women in creating and perserving our American heritage. Rural women must organize to ensure that the value of your daily labors is appreciated and recognized throughout this nation.

Jane R. Threatt, President, Rural American Women

Times are changing fast in rural America. For the first time in this century, the population is growing faster in rural areas than in urban areas. Our energy crisis is calling the nation's attention as never before to rural America, the source of more than 90 percent of our energy-producing resources. The food and fiber which support our nation and so much of the world come too from rural America. These developments provide new opportunities for action and rural women are on the move. We know the changes that are taking place in rural American and the rural world, and the power we have together to effect change. And we also know that the government is us, just us!

Linda Tarr-Whelan, Assistant to Sarah Weddington

In all of the areas chosen for discussion today, whether employment, housing or health care women face the burden of discrimination in legal rights and distribution of services. We must not forget that rural development also means ending discrimination so rural women can use their talents to make improvements in rural life.

Pat Sackrey, Chair, Rural American Women National Board of Directors

Rural women know intimately what it means to make do with scarce resources. As individuals we have had little power over what happens to our natural resources, our land, our schools and hospitals, but now that we are joining together we have begun to feel the power of our commitments to saving the family

farm and to creating a healthy agriculture policy. We're trying hard to imagine and help build a society based on the kind of equality that does not require one group of people climbing on the shoulders of other people to get ahead. We know that we need to learn a lot from each other, from other rural people and from our urban sisters and brothers.

Bernadette Stewart, Housing and Field Services Coordinator; Southern Mutual Help Association, Franklin, Louisiana

I was born on Hayes Plantation 34 years ago. I have helped to build over 49 self-help housings with sugarcane plantation workers. Almost half of all bad housing in this country, 49 percent in 1976 to be exact, is in rural areas, but only a little over one-third of all federal subsidized housing started between 1975 and 1977 is in rural areas. Things won't get much better until rural people get their fair share of federal money particularly for housing and money to purchase land. You can't build housing without land -- unless it's a houseboat to go down the bayou of Louisiana and Farmers Home rules wouldn't allow that.

Donna Shalala, Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

We believe that the presence of rural advocates in HUD and the other federal departments and agencies is an important recognition of the need for equity in allocating a fair share of the federal dollar for rural areas. These rural advocates can be your communication link with the senior federal officials who make the budget and program decisions that affect your communities and your lives.

Bob Bergland, Secretary of Agriculture

We have never really attempted to use the full force, authority and persuasive powers of the federal system to accomplish any set of goals and objectives. A problem arises and the tendency is to put on a patch, pass a law and appropriate money without regard to the ultimate consequences. We cannot solve our problems with slogans and simple solutions because every action we take affects so many people.

Barbara Foote, Farmer and Writer, Hardinsburg, Kentucky

Politically and economically the American farm laborer has always taken it on the chin. While government programs can assist small community and rural development, without a strong agricultural economy, there can be no rural America as we know it now. It is agricultural dollars that support local businesses and markets and create jobs where I live. Though we are not all farmers, agriculture is the bottom line.

Gaye Holliday, Rancher, Homemaker, Former President of Women in Farm Economics, Roundup, Montana

I believe this nation can attain energy self-sufficiency by the year 2000. To do this, the American people will have to use alternative energy such as alcohol fuels, solar, wind, wood and biomass. The federal government must play a strong role in stimulating alternative and small-scale energy production by private industry. These programs should be among the last to be cut from the federal budget.

Dr. Ruth Davis, Assistant Secretary for Resource Application; U.S. Department of Energy

We have a series of checks and balances in our system of government. They look, to many of us, like regulations and red tape but they serve to preserve the rights of individuals as well as the public interest. At the same time, we know things are just not happening fast enough. We are running short of energy and what we do have costs a lot more. Simultaneously, the automobile industry is failing, causing a lot of unemployment. It is the responsibility of the federal government to use our system of checks and balances to match and compose solutions to all of these problems affecting our domestic energy supplies.

Dr. Mary Lynn Fletcher, Public Health Specialist and an Appalachian Woman

Good health care means access to medical services necessary to maintain one's life, health and ability to work. We cannot expect industry to locate in rural areas, nor can we expect people to remain in our small towns, without adequate health care and human services.

Karen Davis, Assistant Secretary for Planning Education and Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

In looking at the health care problems of rural areas, we have found the gap in preventive services to be the most severe. Many rural women do not have access to the most basic diagnostic and disease detection services. This situation is due in part to the severe shortage of medical personnel and facilities serving small towns and rural areas. Another reason is the lack of insurance coverage. Medicaid reimbursement does not apply to most lower income rural families and people working in agriculture, small or non-union businesses have no option, but high cost individual coverage.

Shirley Sandage, Director of the Door Opener, A Center for Employment, Counseling and Referral Services, Mason City, Iowa

Women in rural areas have been most often employed and trained for traditionally feminine occupations -- teaching, nursing, clerical and personal services. Frequently, these are also the lowest paying jobs. Opportunities are few in rural areas where agricultural services and small assembly plants tend to dominate the labor market.

Alexis Herman, Director of the Women's Bureau; U.S. Department of Labor

Included in Department of Labor regulations in funds for training displaced homemakers is language recognizing the special circumstances of rural women. Through your advocacy in consulting with us, you did make a difference in the Department's position on this issue.

Jackie Zerr, Teacher, Counselor and Communication Advocate, Countryside Council, Marshall, Minnesota

When the first telephones were put into rural areas, it was because of federal action. The telephone companies found service to rural areas was not profitable. Today, we need expanded rural communication services to link agricultural and business markets if rural development is to really happen. Whatever changes take place from the planned deregulation of the industry, we need to recognize that telephone companies provide an essential service that must continue to be affordable for rural Americans.

Colleen O'Connor, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs; U.S. Education Department

The federal role in education is to ensure that all children have access to quality public education and to share education advancements with local and state schools. The job of the state and local school is education. For example, we help support a full curriculum for rural schools and share the latest information on reaching methods and new technology. At the same time, we actively encourage rural school districts to allow female students to participate in all school programs and curriculum areas and discourage the practice of channeling young women into traditionally feminine low-paying occupations.

II. FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SMALL COMMUNITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The recommendations made by rural women participating in the June 1980 White House consultation with rural women are diverse and cover selected areas of rural housing, health, education, communications, food, agriculture, land, employment and energy. The policy recommendations include proposed changes in federal rules, regulations and legislation and emphasize the importance of women's organizations and other community-based groups. Most of there recommendations involve a plea for greater government sensitivity to rural needs and to rural women in particular. The women attending the consultation also stressed that rural people know what their needs are and that government as well as industry should respect and encourage their ability to help solve their own problems in their own way. Most importantly, they are a call to action that none of us can afford to ignore.

Housing

- The federal and state governments should provide direct financial and tax incentives to encourage construction of affordable housing in small cities and rural areas to meet national housing goals.

- The federal government should provide direct and indirect low interest loans to community based non-profit corporations for sponsorship of low and moderate income single-family and multi-family housing in rural areas.

- A National Housing Standard should be set and enforced to ensure the availability of decent, safe and sanitary housing for migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

- A federally finances land bank trust program should be created consisting of representatives of local governments, citizens, businesses and community organizations to purchase and develop land for community needs, and to make money for local groups to buy land.

- o The Department of Housing and Urban Development, Farmer's Home Administration, and the Veteran's Administration should issue uniform housing standards that allow maximum flexibility to local conditions and use of locally available materials. In addition, model housing designs, using these flexible standards, should be made widely available to encourage use by housing sponsors and contractors.

- o Federal financial assistance should be available in the form of grants and low interest loans to low and moderate income rural families and individuals for housing rehabilitation and weatherization. In addition, opportunities for home ownership should be increased, procedures for application simplified, and federal financial assistance combined with home maintenance and management counseling and technical assistance.

Land, Food and Agriculture

- o Federal policy should encourage stabilization of crop and livestock production and sales to avoid sharp vacillation in individual farm income from year to year.

- o FmHA should provide credit assistance to small farms where private financing is unavailable. Such assistance should be combined with on-site technical assistance to improve farm management.

- o Federal policy should include tax and other financial incentives to farmers complying with wage, hour and working condition standards for farm labor.

- o The Department of Labor should issue field sanitation and pesticide standards and provide training to encourage on-the-farm compliance to reduce the incidence of accidents and pesticide poisonings.

- Tax laws should encourage retention of family farms by surviving relatives.

- Public hearings and forums should be sponsored regularly by USDA on major food, land and agriculture issues to achieve balance in preserving the rights of individual landowners as well as the public interest.

- A clearly defined national policy to foster the development of small farms should be established.

- The Internal Revenue Service should provide tax educations for farmers whose production techniques enrich the land they live off of. These practices would include terracing land, rotating crops, eliminating soil erosion and other sound soil and water conservation techniques.

- The agricultural extension programs of the Department of Agriculture and the Small Business Administration should help farmers supplement their incomes by developing businesses that are on the farm or related to farm work -- not by providing employment programs that would encourage them away from farming.

Energy

- Federal policy should include greater tax incentives for residential, farm and business energy conservation practices and installation of energy-saving devices. In addition, federal financial assistance should be used to encourage conversion of individual homes, businesses and farms to operation on alternative fuels, particularly those developed from renewable resources (wood, wind, solar, water, biomass).

- Federal policy should reflect a commitment to development of alternative vehicular fuels, particularly gasohol, and should establish a timeable for achieving independence from imported gas and oil.

- Direct financial and technical assistance should be available for local community development and utilization of local energy resources.

- o Federal policy emphasis should be safe, clean energy with concise standards for evaluating energy fuels and technologies.

- o A moratorium on use and development of nuclear power should be declared until the technology of plant operation and disposal of wastes is proven to meet national energy safety and environmental standards.

Health

- o Spinal chord and physical rehabilitation centers should be included in the rural primary care delivery system.

- o Federal financing for rehabilitation programs for physically and mentally disabled rural Americans should be increased to meet the demand for services.

- o Funding for primary health clinics should be restored and increased.

- o National health insurance should be instituted to create affordable health care for all Americans.

- o The Department of Health and Human Services should establish an Office of Rural Affairs to ensure a rural perspective in the issuance of program regulations and in establishing funding priorities for departmental programs.

- o The President's Advisory Council on Small Community and Rural Development should analyzed all legislation in terms of rural impact and provide guidance to the Department of Health and Human Services in development of new legislation to ensure that rural needs and circumstances are considered.

- o A comprehensive reexamination of the function of hospitals and the medical educational systems should be sponsored by HHS to improve the delivery of health care services by small hospitals and clinics.

- Personnel of the National Health Service Corps should be increased and expanded to ensure adequate numbers of medical personnel to serve identified medically underserved rural areas and better coordination with local health professional should occur in determining the NHSC personnel assignment priority system.

- Funding for community health centers, migrant health centers and mental health centers should be increased according to evident needs of medically underserved rural areas.

- Coordination between FmHA and HHS should occur in the allocation of hospital clinic construction funds with staffing and operation funding to ensure a timely response to local requests for medical facility construction in rural underserved areas.

- Federal policy should include increased opportunities for training rural residents in jobs as physician assistants and nurse practitioners to address the critical shortage of health care personnel in rural areas.

- Services of certified counselor's and psychotherapists should be integrated into the rural primary care system.

Education and Communications

- Federal action should be taken to improve access to telephone communication in isolated rural places and to provide incentives to the communications industry to keep rates affordable for low and moderate income rural families and individuals.

- Use of the electronic media should be increased to ensure access to basic and adult education programming to rural women.

- An Office of Rural Education should be established in the Department of Education to analyze proposed legislation and regulations for impact on rural circumstances in the development of Departmental policies and program operations.

- The Department of Education should pursue a comprehensive study of rural education and its impacts on employment, health and economic development in small towns and rural areas.

- The major TV and radio networks should examine their programs to eliminate inaccurate and outdated views of rural life and new programs should be developed to reflect a more realistic picture of what's happening in rural America.

Employment

- The Small Business Administration, the Economic Development Administration and the Department of Labor should broaden counseling services to identify skills learned in unpaid occupations, to place unemployed rural residents in available jobs, and to assist those establishing business enterprises.

- Assistance Programs for small businesses should be reclassified to enable specialized financial and technical assistance for family-owned and operated businesses and businesses employing less than 25 persons.

- Federal assistance available for small farms and businesses should be advertised in rural areas to encourage greater participation by rural enterprises. Greater use should be made of national and local women's groups to help get the word out about federally-supported opportunities.

- The federal set-aside for women and minority -- owned businesses should be increased to encourage establishment of more locally-owned businesses in rural areas.

- o Comprehensive Employment and Training Act slots should be directly allocated to non-governmental community-based organizations as well as to units of local government.

- o Special demonstration programs focusing on the needs of displaced homemakers and older-women should be continued and expanded to improve federal responsiveness to the rural labor force.

- o An Office of Rural Affairs should be established in every major cabinet office for the purpose of planning and reviewing budgets for categorical programs as well as insuring that rural areas get their fair share of federal funds.

Additional recommendations are available from Rural American Women, a national organization representing the concerns of the diversity of America's rural women. For more information, contact:

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